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***Danton's Tod*, II.5: Language, Guilt and Memory**

Steffan Davies

Danton's nightmare and the hallucination that follows it are off-stage cues to a scene that is central to *Danton's Tod*.¹ In an intimate setting, away from the public eye, the personal and the political are here shown to be inextricably intertwined. The scene passes from the involuntary memory prompted by the dream to the attempted exorcism of that memory by staged recollection, or ritual. Its focus on memory on the one hand and agency on the other resonates with the concern of present-day memory studies to connect the 'lived experience' of the individual with an 'outside' or collective understanding of historical events.² The scene explores the central place of language in making that connection: its power, but also its shakiness, as the constituent of past events, of responsibility and conscience, and, finally, of memory itself. The scene is a dialogue, with no inherent need of verbs to describe speaking, and yet containing several: 'rufen', 'sprechen', 'plaudern', 'reden', 'schreien', 'sagen' and 'zeter'n', as well as 'stöhnen', 'fluchen' and 'lügen'.³ Danton opens the scene wanting his senses to be left alone – he wishes for quiet and darkness – and he ends it 'ganz ruhig', 'quite calm', or so he says. By contrast, in between those poles he is apparently eloquent, and is given much more to say than Julie. The drama asks at this point what force the language of others can hold in articulating personal thought. Maurice Halbwachs saw language as fundamental to his notion of a socially constituted 'collective' memory;⁴ 'Nein, ich sprach nicht', 'No, I didn't say it', protests Danton accordingly.

¹ *Danton's Tod* is quoted according to the 'emendierter Text' of *MBA* 3.2, pp. 1-81; all English quotations of the drama are from *TMW*, pp. 23-82. Where possible, Büchner's historical sources are quoted from *MBA* 3.3. It is a pleasure to put on record that this study developed from first- and second-year teaching on Büchner, and thus to thank Bristol students for their lively discussions of the drama, and Bristol colleagues for insights that have shaped the finished piece.

² Susannah Radstone, 'Reconceiving Binaries: The Limits of Memory', *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), 134-50, here p. 138.

³ 'Shout', 'say', 'talk', 'speak', 'scream', 'say', 'shriek', 'moan', 'curse', 'lie'.

⁴ Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1925), p. 111: 'Les conventions verbales constituent donc le cadre à la fois le plus élémentaire et le plus stable de la mémoire collective.' 'Hence verbal conventions constitute what is at the same time the most elementary and the most stable framework of collective memory.' Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* ed. and trans. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 45.

‘Was das Wort nur will? [...] Was streckt es nach mir die blutigen Hände?’⁵ The word that haunts Danton is ‘September’: traumatic shorthand, here as in Büchner’s sources, for the massacre, between 2 and 7 September 1792, of some 1,100-1,400 inmates of Paris prisons. In the febrile atmosphere of the capital as Prussian troops advanced past the fortress of Longwy onto French soil, many of the victims had been rounded up in a mass raid on Parisian homes on 30-31 August; others were common criminals who had the simple misfortune of being in prison at the time.⁶ For many this marked the point at which the radicalized Revolution had gone too far. Büchner’s source, Johann Konrad Friederich’s *Unsere Zeit* (1826-1831), reports an episode at the National Convention in which, as Danton spoke: ‘auf einmal eine dumpfe und hohle Stimme aus dem entgegengesetzten und dunkelsten Winkel des Saales das Wort “September” langsam und feierlich erschallen [ließ], so daß jedermann unwillkürlich zusammenschauerte’.⁷ ‘Septembriseur’ was ‘a term of political abuse’.⁸ In retrospect, the episode was a microcosm of the terror to come. *Unsere Zeit* judged that the massacres were themselves horrific, but ‘gewissermaßen doch nur die Einleitung zu dem furchtbaren Schreckenssystem, das nun bald begann’.⁹ Adolphe Thiers’s *Histoire de la Révolution française* (1823-1827), the other principal source for *Danton’s Tod*, considered the events of ‘cette affreuse nuit’ (2-3 September) to have prepared the ascendancy of extremism in the months to come.¹⁰

September 1792 was thus a touchstone in the debates on the ethics of revolutionary force that had become as relevant to Büchner’s 1830s as they had been four decades previously. Danton and Julie’s stage recollection of Paris in that late summer accurately recounts the logic of the massacres, adapting some of its key phrases from *Unsere Zeit*: ‘Die Festungen gefallen, die Aristocraten in der Stadt’, ‘das war Krieg nach innen’, ‘Du hast das Vaterland

⁵ ‘What does that word want from me? Why does it stretch out its bloody hands toward me?’

⁶ William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 190-92.

⁷ *MBA* 3.3, p. 138. ‘All at once a dull and hollow voice from the furthest, darkest corner of the room slowly and distinctly uttered the word “September”, making everyone’s blood run suddenly cold.’

⁸ Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, as in fn. 6, p. 192.

⁹ Carl Strahlheim [pseud., i.e. Johann Konrad Friederich], *Die Geschichte unserer Zeit*, vol. VI (Stuttgart: Wolters, 1827), p. 32; see also *MBA* 3.3, p. 94. ‘In a way merely the prelude to the appalling systematic reign of terror that began shortly afterwards.’

¹⁰ A. Thiers, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, 10 vols, eleventh edition (Paris: Furne, 1842), II, p. 328 and III, p. 9; on Büchner’s reading of Thiers, *MBA* 3.3, p. 32. A. Thiers, *The History of the French Revolution*, trans. by Frederick Shoberl, 5 vols (London: Bentley, 1838), II, p. 36: ‘that horrid night’.

gerettet'.¹¹ Thiers and Friederich were troubled – Friederich in particular – by the 'fanaticism' of the Reign of Terror, but believed in the Revolution's fundamental necessity.¹² In Simon Schama's judgement, the persistence of this focus on the broader 'dynamics of the Revolution' blinded historians to the massacres' precise causation, and their outrageousness, well into the twentieth century.¹³ Accordingly, this also appeared as an ambiguous episode, for which the general course of events was clear, but precise individual responsibilities, notably Danton's, were not. Both Thiers and Friederich show Danton's part in heightening the tension as the Prussians threatened the capital. Danton, newly appointed Minister of Justice and 'the most powerful man in Paris', insisted after the fall of Longwy that the government stand its ground in the city rather than retreat to Saumur, announced the recruitment of 30,000 Parisians to the army, and ordered the raids on homes: 'les visites domiciliaires, qu'on organisa de la manière la plus effrayante'.¹⁴ It was thus on his initiative that the prisons were full of inmates under suspicion as counter-revolutionaries when, on 2 September, he rallied Parisians to face the enemies of France with 'de l'audace, encore de l'audace, et toujours de l'audace'.¹⁵ His targets were probably external – the Prussians and the émigrés – but the speech triggered the killing. On the other hand, in both Thiers' and Friederich's opinions the advocate and mastermind of the murder was Marat, for whom, according to Friederich, Danton on this occasion was just a willing tool.¹⁶ Schama sees Danton as one of 'those who bore some responsibility for looking away and not doing more to prevent the killings when they were incontrovertibly in a position to have done so'.¹⁷

¹¹ 'The defences had fallen, the aristocrats were in the city', 'that was internal warfare', 'you saved the country'. See *MBA* 3.2, pp. 117-19.

¹² *MBA* 3.3, pp. 34-35 and 93-96; Max Madörin, *Die Septembermassaker von 1792 im Urteil der französischen Revolutionshistoriographie 1792-1840* (Bern and Frankfurt/Main: Lang, 1976), pp. 104-09.

¹³ Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (London: Viking, 1989), p. 631.

¹⁴ Thiers, *Histoire de la Révolution*, as in fn. 10, II, pp. 304-06. Thiers, *The History of the French Revolution*, as in fn. 10, II, p. 25: 'the plan of domiciliary visits was conceived and executed in the most frightful manner'.

¹⁵ Thiers, *Histoire de la Révolution*, as in fn. 10, II, pp. 315-16; similarly *Unsere Zeit: MBA* 3.3, pp. 125-28. Thiers, *The History of the French Revolution*, as in fn. 10, II, p. 31: 'Courage! again courage, and nothing but courage!'

¹⁶ 'im Grunde doch nur das willige Werkzeug', *MBA* 3.3, p. 129; see also Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, as in fn. 6, pp. 190-91. (Contrast, however, *MBA* 3.3, p. 127, where the newly appointed Justice Minister 'herrsche jetzt unumschränkt in der aufgeregten Hauptstadt [...] er war Herr über Marat und seine Feder', 'now ruled unchallenged in the nervous capital, and was master of Marat and his pen'.) Thiers, *Histoire de la Révolution*, as in fn. 10, II, p. 310: 'Danton [...] prêta son audace aux horribles rêveries de Marat: ils formèrent tous deux un complot dont plusieurs siècles ont donné l'exemple, mais qui, à la fin du dix-huitième, ne peut pas s'expliquer par l'ignorance des temps et la férocité des mœurs.' Thiers, *The History of the French Revolution*, as in fn. 10, II, p. 28: 'Danton [...] lent his audacity to the atrocious reveries of Marat. The two hatched a plot, of which several centuries have furnished examples, but which, at the end of the eighteenth, cannot be explained by the ignorance of the times and the ferocity of manners.'

¹⁷ Schama, *Citizens*, as in fn. 13, p. 632.

Danton's part in the massacres is muddled further by his later claim to having had a hand in the event; his political position sharpened the need to press his actions into a positive narrative. His response to the heckler at the National Convention was not denial, but the insistence reproduced by Büchner in II.5: 'Ja, in den Tagen des Septembers habe ich das Vaterland gerettet, denn der Feind war vor unsern Thoren.'¹⁸ His remarks to the Duc de Chartres in the autumn of 1792 – boasting responsibility for the massacres at the same time as suggesting that his hand was forced – lead Norman Hampson to observe that 'Danton's unsupported word can never be taken as evidence, not even against himself'.¹⁹

Confusion of the individual and the collective, and of events and their retrospective construction, is thus as much a part of the historical episode as it is of Büchner's scene. Danton's exploration of conscience in his first speech in II.5 already touches on both. As he wakes from his nightmare, he redefines guilt not as the personal experience which plagued him in the previous scene, but as what human beings see and speak of in each other. Darkness and quiet would cancel 'die garstigen Sünden', 'ugly sins', by putting an end to their retelling. Danton models Halbwachs's observation that memory is not constituted *in* dreams but, at best, after them, as the images in an individual's dream are fragmentary. 'The dream is based only upon itself,' argues Halbwachs, 'whereas our recollections depend on those of all our fellows, and on the great frameworks of the memory of society.'²⁰ Danton retells his dream to Julie, and by the end of the scene he has found an answer to his conscience rather than seeking to abdicate from it. His hand was forced in self-defence, and that forcing of his hand fills him with horror. Humans have no control over their actions: 'Puppen sind wir, [...] nichts, nichts wir selbst!', 'we are puppets [...] we ourselves are nothing, nothing!' The dream, too, seems to have been about power without control. Freud would later remark that the act of riding in dreams 'ist die energischste Negation des Leidens, die der Vorstellung zugänglich ist', and Goethe's Egmont, in prison, sees a vision of riding free, but Danton's ride is the exact opposite.²¹ Beyond the individual's capacity to act,

¹⁸ *Unsere Zeit*: MBA 3.3, p. 138. 'Yes, in the days of September I saved the fatherland, for the enemy was at our gates'.

¹⁹ Norman Hampson, *Danton* (London: Duckworth, 1978), p. 82.

²⁰ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, as in fn. 4, p. 42. 'C'est que le rêve ne repose que sur lui-même, alors que nos souvenirs s'appuient sur ceux de tous les autres, et sur les grands cadres de la mémoire de la société.' Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux*, as in fn. 4, p. 53.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung* [1900], *Gesammelte Werke*, vols. II/III (London: Imago, 1942), p. 236; 'it is the most energetic denial of the pain which imagination could conceive.' Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*,

the second dimension of conscience tackled here is the ability to know and to articulate that knowledge. This starts at a more basic level than the construction of political narrative, which will follow later in the scene: 'Georg, Georg,' asks Julie, 'erkennst du mich?' 'do you recognize me?' She reverses what she has asserted in the opening scene – 'Du kennst mich Danton', 'you know me, Danton' – to which Danton had replied:

Ja, was man so kennen heißt. Du hast dunkle Augen und lockiges Haar und einen feinen Teint und sagst immer zu mir: lieb Georg. Aber *er deutet ihr auf Stirn und Augen* da, da, was liegt hinter dem? Geh, wir haben grobe Sinne. Einander kennen? Wir müßten uns die Schädeldecken aufbrechen und die Gedanken einander aus den Hirnfasern zerren.²²

Danton's nightmare and hallucination seem to do what he has described. They 'break open his skull' and display his thoughts, making him speak out what he has hardly thought and does not want to be heard. Here again there is a proleptic connection to Freud; and in openly baring and answering his conscience, Danton – if inadvertently – appears to offer a model in literature for coming to terms with guilt.

Yet if on the one hand the scene shows us a contrite Danton, on the other hand he and Julie switch swiftly to rehearsing the facts that exonerate him. If his hand was forced, then how can he be guilty? Furthermore, if memory is socially constituted, then discerning genuine, unmediated character indeed seems impossible, for in the act of remembering we all play social roles. Danton the character, like the historical figure, adds to such general role-playing the politician's public narrative of his actions, even in the intimate setting of this scene. Indeed, as the previous scene demonstrates, even a soliloquy is best understood not as a baring of the 'real' character, but as a conscious stage dialogue with the self. John Reddick argues that Danton's 'self-defence' in II.5 is self-delusion, and that the delusion continues through to include the comment on the 'puppets', which is further rhetorical manoeuvring as Danton covers his tracks.²³ By application of Reddick's analysis, Danton would thus seem to demonstrate the 'perpetrator's memory', prone to denial, that Aleida Assmann

trans. by A. A. Brill (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1937), p. 226. See further Reinhold Grimm, "Dantons Tod" – ein Gegenentwurf zu Goethes "Egmont"?, *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, 33 (1983), 424-57, esp. pp. 437-38.

²² 'Yes, whatever "knowing" means. You have dark eyes and curly hair and a nice complexion and you always say to me: dear George. But (*He points to her forehead and eyes.*) there – there: what's behind that? No, our senses are coarse. Know each other? We'd have to break open our skulls and pull each other's thoughts out of the brain fibers.'

²³ John Reddick, *Georg Büchner: The Shattered Whole* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 132-34.

characterizes by quoting from Nietzsche's *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. Assmann sets Nietzsche's continuous prose on separate lines as a miniature psychological drama, 'ein Seelendrama en miniature':

'Das habe ich gethan', sagt mein Gedächtniss.

'Das kann ich nicht gethan haben' – sagt mein Stolz und bleibt unerbittlich.

Endlich – giebt das Gedächtniss nach.²⁴

Furthermore, on the evidence of Büchner's sources, Danton's culpability was indeed limited – the massacres really were dreadful but necessary, and he did not order them as such – but the drama deliberately defies such straightforward logic. It does not ape the sources; indeed, in its portrayal of a Danton whose exploitatively luxurious lifestyle undermines the Revolution's core ideals, it exceeds them.²⁵ With Danton's ambiguous guilt it develops further a disquiet that Büchner had articulated in his much-quoted letter to Wilhelmine Jaeglé in early 1834. Büchner wrote of a 'terrible fatalism of history' that had 'crushed' him as he read 'the history of the Revolution', where necessity trumped morality:

Ich finde in der Menschennatur eine entsetzliche Gleichheit, in den menschlichen Verhältnissen eine unabwendbare Gewalt, Allen und Keinem verliehen. [...] [D]ie Herrschaft des Genies ein Puppenspiel, ein lächerliches Ringen gegen ein ehernes Gesetz, es zu erkennen das Höchste, es zu beherrschen unmöglich.²⁶

Büchner's letter need not be taken as a definitive statement, least of all on the politics of the 1830s, given especially that his phrase 'die Geschichte der Revolution' may well refer to his particular reading material, Thiers's 'fatalist' *Histoire*, rather than to history in general (see *MBA* 3.2, pp. 197-99). What is significant is that whereas Thiers's Revolution had a purpose, the drama's has none beyond its own self-perpetuation. The drama offers no conclusions. There is no higher end that might justify compromised means: by II.5, which

²⁴ Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2007 [Munich: Beck, 2006]), p. 82; cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), vol. v, p. 86, § 68. "'I did that' says my memory. I couldn't have done that – says my pride, and stands its ground. Finally, memory gives in.' Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 59.

²⁵ Jan-Christoph Hauschild, *Georg Büchner. Biographie* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1993), pp. 444-47.

²⁶ *MBA* 10.1, p. 30; 'I find in human nature a horrifying sameness, in the human condition an inescapable force, granted to all and to no one. [...] [T]he mastery of genius a mere puppet play, a ludicrous struggle against an iron law: to recognize it is our utmost achievement, to control it is impossible.' (*TMW*, pp. 185-86).

famously quotes the letter, Danton's conscience has not been settled by the political necessity of the deed.

There is another solution to the paradox of contrition and denial in this scene, with particular potential to come to life in performance. Danton and Julie are not merely role-playing; more specifically, they do not seem to be having this conversation for the first time. Their mutual history lesson is a set piece, or as Margaret Jacobs describes it (with a nod to Payne in III.1), a 'catechism', a series of set questions and answers leading to the necessary conclusion that the massacres were self-defence.²⁷ Significantly this part of the scene, but only this part, uses substantial verbatim quotation from the sources. Reiner Niehoff argues that Danton at this point 'versucht [...] seine Vision einer katastrophal einstürzenden Geschichte in eine "Kette von Begebenheiten" zu verwandeln'.²⁸ Danton gives Julie an obvious cue: 'O hilf mir, Julie, mein Sinn ist stumpf. War's nicht im September Julie?', 'Oh, help me, Julie, my senses are dull. Wasn't it in September, Julie?', the shift from evocative 'September' to determinate 'im September' marking the beginning of the sequence.²⁹ There has been a similar rehearsal of routine earlier in the scene:

Julie. [...] Georg, Georg, erkennst du mich?

Danton. Ey warum nicht, du bist ein Mensch und dann eine Frau und endlich meine Frau, und die Erde hat 5 Welttheile, Europa, Asien, Africa, America, Australien, und zweimalzwei macht vier. Ich bin bey Sinnen, siehst du.³⁰

In order to escape the ghost of 'September', Danton and Julie have simply developed another routine, to which they are equally enslaved. What Danton means by his exclamation on the puppets depends on how the speech is played. 'Es muß, das war dies Muß', 'It must – it was this "must"', is either a continuation of the excuse-making, or the point at which Danton is drawn up short, snaps out of the routine and realizes how hopeless

²⁷ Georg Büchner, *Dantons Tod and Woyzeck*, ed. with introduction and notes by Margaret Jacobs, fourth edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 4.

²⁸ Reiner Niehoff, *Die Herrschaft des Textes. Zitattechnik als Sprachkritik in Georg Büchners Drama 'Dantons Tod' unter Berücksichtigung der 'Letzten Tage der Menschheit' von Karl Kraus* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1991), p. 199. Danton 'tries to transform his vision of a historical cataclysm into a chain of events'.

²⁹ The shift is observed by Daniel Müller Nielaba, *Die Nerven lesen. Zur Leit-Funktion von Georg Büchners Schreiben* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2001), p. 117.

³⁰ 'Georg, Georg, do you recognize me? – Oh, why not? You are a human being, a woman, and finally my wife, and the earth has five continents, Europe, Asia, Africa, America, Australia; and two times two is four. I haven't lost my mind, you see.'

its message is. The previous, shorter routine, after all, has already ended in relapse – ‘Ich bin bey Sinnen, siehst du. Schrie’s nicht September?’, ‘I haven’t lost my mind, you see. Didn’t something scream “September”?’ – and in the parallel passage from the first scene, Danton knows the facts about Julie, but these do not satisfy him that he knows *her*.

This is a drama hallmarked, of course, by textual routines. Its reflection on its own theatricality is at its most obvious in Camille’s comments about the idealist stage (II.3), preceded by the two gentlemen talking about theatrical spectacle at the end of a scene which echoes the Easter Sunday scene in Goethe’s *Faust I* (II.2). It makes extensive verbatim use of its sources, and refers copiously to other texts, not least to the Bible and to Shakespeare, whose *Macbeth*, in particular, is in the background in II.5.³¹ This is a script that follows other scripts, a text that quotes and echoes itself (II.5, for example, mirrors Robespierre’s dream at the end of Act I), and a drama in which the characters appropriate set phrases to their own cause. They know that they are adopting and adapting the verbal models of the Revolution, indeed they are aware that because the Revolution is constituted by words, life and acting are there one and the same, in contrast to Camille’s criticism of theatre. This is established in the drama’s opening scene, and the sequence of reflections on theatre in II.2 and II.3 is prefaced by Danton’s remark in II.1 that a stage death would be preferable to a real death, and fitting too, for ‘wir stehen immer auf dem Theater, wenn wir auch zuletzt im Ernst erstochen werden’.³² For the crowd, the Dantonists’ execution is indeed spectacle, and an unimpressive one at that: ‘Das war schon einmal da! wie langweilig!’³³ Simon is one of the play’s most quotation- and cliché-happy characters, but he is a theatre prompter: his job is to keep the actors running to the script. The prisoners sing the ‘Marseillaise’ of the revolution that is about to guillotine them; Lucile suicidally borrows ‘Es lebe der König!’, ‘Long live the King!’, and is arrested ‘im Namen der Republik’, ‘in the name of the Republic’.

Language is powerful in *Danton’s Tod* – language often *is* action³⁴ – but the same drama shows disaffection with language and distrust of it. The force of quotation is not to empower the characters but to entrap them. Niehoff points out that the rhetoric of

³¹ For a detailed account of the intertexts to II.5: *MBA* 3.4, pp. 137-41.

³² ‘We’re always on stage, even if we’re finally stabbed to death in earnest.’

³³ IV. 7: ‘We’ve heard that before. How dull!’

³⁴ See Reddick, *Georg Büchner*, as in fn. 23, p. 118.

historical actors read in Büchner's sources is not so much reproduced in the drama as it is converted into a pre-defined linguistic system, so that rhetoric, 'power through language', is turned instead into 'the hegemony of the text'.³⁵ The characters see through their own and others' phrases, but this does not empower them. Whether language just comes out – whether, as Danton puts it, '[die] Gedanken [...] bey der Geburt gleich schreien, wie Kinder', 'thoughts [...] scream at birth like children' – or whether all that is available is a set text, its speakers have no control over it. Robespierre in I.6 stands out when he departs, for a moment, from the revolutionary script, interrupted by St Just who will do no such thing. Danton distrusts linguistic routine and is bored of it. Put up by Camille to a verbal offensive – 'Danton du wirst den Angriff im Convent machen' – he evades the challenge: 'Ich werde, du wirst, er wird'.³⁶ On the other hand his catchphrase, 'Sie werden's nicht wagen', 'they won't dare', itself becomes a refrain, and it is quoted, in turn, from Thiers. II.5 is the point at which it becomes clear that Danton does not simply dislike the phrases, but finds them empty. The audience has already seen the meaninglessness of the Revolution's slogans on the one hand and their terrible logic on the other – 'ergo todtgeschlagen', 'ergo, kill them' (I.2) – but this is where it sees the fundamental incapacity of such slogans to explain Danton's past and to convince *him*. Danton thus enacts here the resistance to artifice that Paul Celan, on accepting the Büchner Prize in 1960, identified in Lucile at the drama's end:

[...] als rings um Camille Pathos und Sentenz den Triumph von 'Puppe' und 'Draht' bestätigen, da ist Lucile, die Kunstblinde, dieselbe Lucile, für die Sprache etwas Personhaftes und Wahrnehmbares hat, noch einmal da, mit ihrem plötzlichen 'Es lebe der König!'

[...]

Das [...] hat keinen ein für allemal feststehenden Namen, aber ich glaube, es ist ... die Dichtung.³⁷

³⁵ Niehoff, *Die Herrschaft des Textes*, as in fn. 28, esp. pp. 140-41.

³⁶ I, 1. 'Danton, you will lead the attack in the Convention. – I will, you will, he will.'

³⁷ Paul Celan, *Der Meridian. Rede anlässlich der Verleihung des Georg-Büchner-Preises 1960* (Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer, 1961), pp. 7-8. 'When all around Camille pathos and sententiousness confirm the triumph of "puppet" and "string," then Lucile, one who is blind to art, the same Lucile for whom language is something person-like and tangible, is there once again, with her sudden "Long live the King!" [...] This [...] has no name fixed once and for all, but I believe that this is ... poetry.'" Paul Celan, *The Meridian. Final Version – Drafts – Materials*. Ed. by Bernhard Böschstein et al., trans. by Pierre Joris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 3-4.

For Celan, the 'art' from which Lucile and poetry lead away is impersonal: 'Kunst schafft Ich-Ferne'.³⁸ Danton's routine illustrates the point. He has the opportunity to justify his actions by means of an official narrative, but he takes that opportunity only by denying, with whatever degree of conviction, that he has really acted at all.

II.5 contains memory in each of the 'four formats' proposed by Aleida Assmann to connect individual and collective remembering.³⁹ Danton has *individual* memories of September 1792 and stresses to Julie that those are 'heimliche Gedanken', 'secret thoughts', and '[s]eine Gedanken', '[his] thoughts'; there is Marion's story (I.5) and Camille and Robespierre's regretful recollection of their childhood together (I.6 and II.3). Büchner's interest here in the power of personal memory goes hand in hand with his ideas on the physiological connections between thought and action. Danton's individual remorse is turned into *social* memory in this scene: 'Wir konnten den Feind nicht im Rücken lassen [...] wir mußten'.⁴⁰ In one sense this is a deft sharing out of responsibility, but it is also an accurate reflection of the episode's ambiguity, and bears out Danton's suggestion that guilt is constituted socially. Group identities are expressed elsewhere in shared, code references to the recent past, 'das Blut der zwei und zwanzig', 'the blood of the twenty-two' (the Girondins, III.1), for example. The logic of the radical Revolution relies on forging, in Assmann's terms, a functional *political* identity from those shared memories: 'political memory is not fragmentary and diverse but emplotted in a narrative that is emotionally charged and conveys a clear and invigorating message.'⁴¹ St Just invokes iconic dates as the 'punctuation' in his murderous statement of the Revolution's principles at the National Convention (II.7), and the meeting of the Jacobins in I.3, overseen, whether physically or figuratively, by the 'busts of the saints', opens with the tirade against royalist Lyons:

³⁸ 'Art creates I-distance.' Celan, *The Meridian*, as in fn. 37, p. 5.

³⁹ Aleida Assmann, 'Four Formats of Memory: From Individual to Collective Constructions of the Past', in *Cultural Memory and Historical Consciousness in the German-Speaking World since 1500*, ed. by Christian Emden and David Midgley (Oxford: Lang, 2004), pp. 19-37.

⁴⁰ 'We couldn't ignore the enemy at our backs, we had to' (*TMW*, p. 52, emphasis SD).

⁴¹ Assmann, 'Four Formats of Memory', as in fn. 39, p. 26.

[...] wir wissen, daß [...] die Mörder Chaliér's wieder so fest auf den Boden treten, als ob es kein Grab für sie gäbe. Habt Ihr vergessen, daß Lyon ein Flecken auf dem Boden Frankreichs ist, den man mit den Gebeinen der Verräther zudecken muß?⁴²

In turn, Büchner's drama reflected and reinforced the place of the French Revolution in Germany's longer-term *cultural* memory, in his own time and thereafter. Danton the character is traumatized by 'September'; *Danton* the play recalled historical trauma as Europe once more seemed gripped by revolution.

On the other hand, the immediate world of the play is also a world from which memory is strikingly absent. Danton stands out because his memory will plague him as long as he lives (II.4), whereas the drama's political memory is short, functional and in flux. The disjunctions between dialogue and soliloquy in I.6 show Robespierre wavering between memory and the forgetful logic of the Revolution. Lacroix urges Danton to see that his reputation – 'Mein Name! Das Volk!' – will not save him and his good name is as transient as any other (I.5). Danton may be booking his place in cultural memory when he claims at his trial that his name will soon be in the pantheon of history, but the indictment against him instead fits him into a standard rogues' gallery of the Revolution's enemies: 'der Convent beschuldigt Sie mit Mirabeau, mit Dumouriez, mit Orleans, mit den Girondisten, den Fremden und der Faction Ludwig des 17. conspirirt zu haben.'⁴³ (III.4). St Just observes that this is a period 'wo der Gang der Geschichte rascher ist': the accelerated appetite of the guillotine militates precisely against the creation of legends (II.7). The founding dates that St Just cites in the same speech all fall within the past five years; the Jacobin saints are recent canonizations of a Revolution which, as Lacroix warns Danton, is uninterested in their relics. The memory of the people is notoriously short.

Danton's 'September' similarly exposes the breaks in the transition from individual memory to a shared memorial culture. The changes of direction in II.5 are reminders that personal, involuntary memory is, itself, mediated, and that that mediation of memory is not the same as its articulation.⁴⁴ Language is the necessary tool of common memory, but here it

⁴² 'We do know that [...] Chaliér's murderers again walk the earth as if there were no grave for them. Have you forgotten that Lyons is a blot on French soil which we must cover with the corpses of traitors?'

⁴³ III, 4: 'The Convention accuses you of having conspired with Mirabeau, with Dumouriez, with Orléans, with the Girondists, with foreigners, and with the faction of Louis XVII.'

⁴⁴ Radstone, 'Reconceiving Binaries', as in fn. 2, pp. 135-36.

obscures as much as it articulates. In order for Danton and Julie to share an understanding of 'September' in this scene, Julie has to pretend that she has heard the same as Danton ('Schrie's nicht September? Sagtest du nicht so was?'), when in fact *she* has heard the cry 'durch alle Zimmer' but *he* has heard it in his mind.⁴⁵ The transition that Assmann describes, to a 'stabilize[d]' and 'institutionalized' political narrative – Danton and Julie's routine – does not ultimately quell the personal distress that has provoked it in the first place: 'Was ist das, was in uns lügt, hurt, stiehlt und mordet?' 'What is it in us that whores, lies, steals and murders?'⁴⁶ Resistance to 'political memory' is also suggested in this scene by reversing the chronology of cause and effect: '[a]s so often in the play', comments Reddick, 'Büchner brilliantly exploits the technique of starting a scene as it were in the middle.'⁴⁷ The audience first sees Danton at the window, only then the nightmare that has woken him up, and after that the account of the historical episode that underlies it. In his Zurich trial lecture *Über Schädelnerven* (October 1836), Büchner was to reject 'teleological' anatomy – the body's organs defined by their purpose – in favour of 'philosophical' method, the organs described by their effect.⁴⁸ Anja Schonlau argues that the politics of *Danton's Tod* are not determined by passion – which would have an object, or *telos* – but by mood.⁴⁹ By extension, the September Massacres are not remembered here as the Republic's self-defence at the moment it came of age; rather, the focus is on memory where it first begins, its consequences seen before – and ultimately unchanged by – the historical narrative that is called upon to shape and answer it.

Danton's memory is that of a perpetrator and a victim, and II.5 and the soliloquy that precedes it mark the point at which he passes from one to the other, for good. This pair of scenes might thus also complicate the notion that survivors tell their stories, whereas perpetrators tend to keep theirs quiet: Danton certainly wants to hush up the past, but cannot. The scenes play out the 'drama' that Assmann finds in Nietzsche, but end with pride

⁴⁵ 'Didn't something scream "September"? Isn't that what you said? [...] I heard it through all the rooms.' See Müller Nielaba, *Die Nerven lesen*, as in fn. 29, p. 115. Müller Nielaba's argument is that Danton understands the illusion and thus is, paradoxically, 'bey Sinnen'.

⁴⁶ Assmann, 'Four Formats of Memory', as in fn. 39, p. 25. Assmann indeed notes – with reference in her case to the *Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas* in Berlin – that the shift from bottom-up to top-down memory 'does not go unnoticed and may become the target of considerable criticism and alienation' (ibid.).

⁴⁷ Reddick, *Georg Büchner*, as in fn. 23, p. 130.

⁴⁸ *MBA* 8, pp. 153-55.

⁴⁹ Anja Schonlau, "'Nimmt einer ein Gefühlchen.'" Die Emotionen der Französischen Revolution in Georg Büchners Metadrama *Danton's Tod*, *GBJb*, 11 (2005-2008), 3-24, here pp. 22-24.

conceding to memory. Danton's instinct is to seek closure, but his conscience wins out. Seen in terms of 'perpetrators' testimony', Danton is of course as capable as any defendant of putting his actions in the best possible light, but the breaks in tone and logic in the scene are important, because they suggest that Danton the perpetrator is his own interrogator too. It is Danton who, in the parallel dialogue with Robespierre (I.6), has suggested that Robespierre should see himself thus: 'Ist denn nichts in dir, was dir nicht manchmal ganz leise, heimlich sagte, du lügst, du lügst!'⁵⁰ Danton's crime does not compare in scale, seriousness or unambiguity with those of the Nazi elite, but the scene nonetheless enacts the split between perpetrator and narrator that Robert Eaglestone identifies in perpetrator testimony: Albert Speer pre- and post-imprisonment; Speer and Franz Stangl as they appear in Gitta Sereny's investigations of them.⁵¹ Eaglestone urges the readers of such testimony to remember 'that these texts, too, are also texts: that is, they are shaped by horizons of expectation, construction – in short, by genre rules'.⁵² In *Danton's Tod* the investigation is transposed into imaginative literature; this drama's particular emphasis on narrative routine heightens awareness that events are on the one hand separate from retrospect, but are also, on the other hand, constituted solely in that rearwards view. Celan's speech hints at the propensity of poetry, and of modern poetry especially, towards such chronological layering of meaning, and at the ubiquitous presence of guilt among the layers. 20 January, he hints, speaks dually of the journey 'through the mountains' undertaken by Büchner's Lenz, but also of the Wannsee Conference in 1942: 'Vielleicht darf man sagen, daß jedem Gedicht sein "20. Jänner" eingeschrieben bleibt? [...] schreiben wir uns nicht alle von solchen Daten her?'⁵³ Both scene and drama model the inadequacy of language to grasp the causes, not just the means and methods, of evil. Danton in II.5 tries out the talk in clichés that Hannah Arendt saw in Adolf Eichmann, but is unconvinced.⁵⁴ Nothing here lets him answer the

⁵⁰ 'Isn't there something in you that sometimes whispers secretly you lie, you lie!' See further Alessandro Costazza, 'Der "gräßliche Fatalismus der Geschichte" und die Funktion des Theodizee-Diskurses in Georg Büchners *Dantons Tod*', in *Die Tragödie der Moderne. Gattungsgeschichte – Kulturtheorie – Epochendiagnose*, ed. by Daniel Fulda and Thorsten Valk (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 107-26, here p. 108.

⁵¹ Robert Eaglestone, 'Reading Perpetrator Testimony', in *The Future of Memory*, ed. by Richard Cronshaw, Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland (New York: Berghahn, 2010), pp. 123-34, here p. 128.

⁵² Eaglestone, 'Reading Perpetrator Testimony', as in fn. 51, p. 124.

⁵³ Celan, *Der Meridian*, as in fn. 37, p. 16. 'Perhaps one can say that each poem has its own "20th of January" inscribed in it? [...] Don't we all write ourselves from such dates?' Celan, *The Meridian*, (as in fn. 37), p. 8. 'Jänner' or 'Januar' in the opening sentence of *Lenz* is a much-repeated, but unauthorized, emendation: see *MBA* 5, pp. 12 and 371.

⁵⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Faber, 1963), p. 48.

ultimate 'why?' of his crimes; nothing explains his guilt. Later, Danton will be interrogated in public, and there as in Büchner's sources he will list September 1792 – and his power of speech – among his revolutionary credentials (III.4):

Ich habe im September die junge Brut der Revolution mit den zerstückten Leibern der Aristocraten geätzt. Meine Stimme hat aus dem Golde der Aristocraten und Reichen dem Volke die Waffen geschmiedet. Meine Stimme war der Orkan, welcher die Satelliten des Despotismus unter Wogen von Bajonetten begrub.⁵⁵

That trial, however, has nothing to do with establishing the truth; the real interrogation has already taken place in private, in Danton's room, at night.

It therefore fits that II.5 comes at the moment when Danton's fate is already sealed, sitting precisely between his return to Paris and his arrest after the following scene. This scene shows him at the last real turning-point between action ('Tätigkeit', 'der Täter') and suffering. His incoherence finds logic only when it is clear that logic will not solve the problem. The scene is a microcosm of eloquence when it is too late, and of rhetoric that expresses the powerlessness rather than the power of the individual. Danton's life, his conscience and his bad night are all destined from here for an end in peace: 'I'm calm now', 'Jetzt bin ich ruhig'.

⁵⁵ III, 4. 'In September I gorged the young brood of the Revolution with the dismembered corpses of the aristocrats. My voice forged weapons for the people out of the gold of the aristocrats and the rich. My voice was the typhoon that buried the minions of despotism under waves of bayonets.'